

# TRADITIONAL DANCE IN CATALONIA



JUST AS OUR SOCIETY CHANGES, SO DO THE VALUES OF EXPRESSION, COMMUNICATION AND ANIMATION IN OUR POPULAR DANCE, WHICH IS INCREASINGLY TO BE FOUND ON THE STAGE.

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**O**ur people –limited in number, companion to the other peoples of the Mediterranean– learnt a series of dances with which to express their concerns: the figures of Cogul speak for themselves as regards those early intentions; the dances of the Celts, Greeks, Rome, Provence, Ripoll, etc. Long years and countless generations for whom dance was a way of expressing battles, celebrating victories, ensuring a successful hunt, making the wheat grow, keeping danger away, enchanting young girls, achieving fertility, celebrating a Patron Saint or renewing posts of responsibility in the brotherhoods.

As a result of this wealth of tradition, a number of popular dances have been handed down to us which are characteristic of particular circumstances and often used without any scenic or aesthetic intention. This is our people's expressive "corpus", which, with all its mutations and its agrarian and artisan

context, presents us with the challenge of handing it down to future generations in an urban, post-industrial society which doesn't know how to assimilate this heritage and which has not yet found its own sense of celebration. It's now some years since the creative capacity of a series of organisations and individuals, taking up a somewhat poetic initiative on the part of Jacint Verdaguer, set up the dance groups which we still call "esbarts", and which are amateur dance groups, something like amateur theatrical groups, devoted exclusively to traditional dancing as a social activity and a way of defending our national identity, and which appeared in a period of political organisation which was not very favourable to Catalonia.

## *The Fifties*

The fifties were particularly prolific in this sense, because the grand spectacle approach adopted by the Esbart Verda-

guer achieved splendid results and gave rise to a rich duality between those groups in favour of so-called "authenticity", led by the Esbart Català de Dansaires, and those in favour of the spectacle. The number of these groups in existence –well over 200– makes this dance movement one of the most important in the world of popular culture. But our changing society is gradually stifling the values of expression, communication and animation in popular dancing, which is increasingly missing from festivals and present on the stage, although there are a number of towns and villages all over the country that strive to preserve their festivals and dances. And alongside them are other towns that are gradually retrieving their traditional dances, which once more take their place in popular activity, though in the form of a diversion.

In the last few years, except for a few very determined groups who have worked at the job of researching and



RUBÍ DANCE GROUP, *DANSES DE LA MORT CAMINADA*

presenting dances with the maximum possible purity, most of the groups or *esbarts* have chosen the way of the stage show, and present a series of dances and traditional activities, interspersed with brief commentaries intended as a guide to the spectator, and arranged in two parts. In this period, hard work and successful presentation have made the Esbart Dansaire de Rubí the outstanding leader.

#### *The New Stage Productions*

In the field of new stage productions, certain specific events by different performers but with the same renovatory intention should be mentioned.

"El Comte Arnau" is a dramatization in which popular dance is used to tell the eternal message of this Catalan legend. The show uses an idea by Joaquim Vilà i Folch, with music by Tomàs Gil and scenography and wardrobe by Fabià Puigcerver, and was first performed by the Esbart de Cornellà on 16th April, 1982, under the direction of Ferran Gimeno.

"Enagos meus" uses traditional dance to present a dramatic allegory of the four seasons, with a light-hearted, magical approach. The set, script and direction are by Quim Lecina, musical arrangements by Joan Figueres and the choreographies and dance selection by Joan Serra. It was first performed in Rubí in November 1984.

"Setmana Santa", with text by Salvador

Espriu, reflects on death through traditional dance. The show is produced, directed and interpreted by Enric Majó, who was also responsible for the scenography and wardrobe. The dances were performed by the Esbart de Rubí, selection and choreographic arrangements were by Albert Sans and the music was arranged by Pere Bués. It was first performed in Rubí in July 1986.

The Montserrat "Dances del Llibre Vermell" is probably the most important production by the esbart de Rubí, both in its first version, by Father Gregori Estrada, very well received by many specialists, and in its second version, with a new musical score by Xavier Benguerel. Both choreographies were by Albert Sans i Aris.

Although the rigorous authority of the work of Father Estrada struck those attending the first night at the Basilica of Montserrat on 27th May 1978 and went on to achieve great acceptance and recognition in France and Germany, it is the second version which occupies us at present, conceived as a grand show, in which traditional steps are used –as in the first version– to express the inspiration of a composer of our own times. The debut was held at the Gran Teatre del Liceu, in Barcelona, in September 1987.

In this context and linked to the most popular dancing, we find the recent work produced by the Esbart Sant Cugat, which narrates, from popular in-

spiration, the personal interpretations and musical arrangements of the "Cançons i Danses" of Frederic Mompou. It was first performed in Terrassa in December 1989, with scenography by Carles Casas and Gina Cubeles, dramatization by Quim Lecina and choreography by Joan Serra i Vilamitjana.

The relative proximity of all these events has not yet given a differentiated line, but they do at least seem to point to the establishment of a new school, one which is more structured and demanding, and which, with the collaboration of professionals, could become the new Catalan Theatrical Dance, along the lines of the "baile español" and of so many groups who have offered us their research into traditions, from the Portuguese "Verde Gaio" to the disputed "Rey de Viana" or the prestigious formations from the countries of the east.

But even if we have the most spectacular "national ballet", traditional dancing will still be that stick dance, that sardana festival, the Easter festivities or Carnival, and the delightful chanting of the children for the feast of Santa Llúcia or Midsummer's Eve. And the sardana sessions on holidays, the only traditional dance event which can still be described as popular, and which –more or less accurately executed– is the traditionally festive image of a people who have always expressed themselves through dance. ■